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NAVY MEDICINE IN FOCUS

Saving Shipwrecked Personnel in World War II

BY VJOHNSON – MAY 8, 2014

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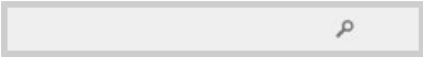


"It got hot and then cold and we grew hungrier and thirstier. The men started dying one by one and we buried them as they died.

—William Colbon, lone survivor of an American torpedoed merchant ship, 1943

After being established in 1942, the Navy Medical Research Institute (NMRI) set forth on an ambitious mission of saving the lives of military personnel through research and innovative thinking.

Throughout World War II, NMRI's staff of scientific troubleshooters pioneered aviation first aid kits, insect repellents, and resuscitation devices and devised new protective measures against blast injuries, immersion foot, seasickness and sunburn. But, all of these developments would follow in the wake of its first assigned project: devising a full-proof method for desalting



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seawater and developing special food rations for the war’s unfortunate sea castaways.

Although there are no official statistics on how many World War II Sailors, Marines, merchant mariners and military aviators awaited rescue aboard life rafts in World War II, a conservative estimate would have been tens of thousands.

Following the loss of their ships or aircraft, the castaway would often face a gauntlet of inclement weather conditions, the threat of secondary attacks, sharks, and subsist—if “lucky”—on limited food and water rations. Without food, the average person can survive for about 21 days; and without water for about three days.

Beginning in 1943, NMRI experimented with chemically processing seawater so that it could be drunk by personnel adrift on life rafts. In February 1943, NMRI scientist Lt. Cmdr. Spealman, H (S), USNR developed a multi-process filtering system for desalinating seawater.

A similar, but simpler method developed by the Permutit water conditioning company in collaboration with NMRI would later be adopted for widespread use. The “Permutit-Navy Desalting Kit” contained a plastic drinking bag with a cloth filter at its base and five briquettes of desalting chemical.

The castaway would collect seawater in the drinking bag, drop in a briquette, seal the bag and shake it. Within 20 minutes they would have access to a pint of fresh water that they could drink through a tube beneath the filter. Within the year, the kit would be adopted by the Army, Navy as well as American Airlines.

Food rations were another concern for NMRI researchers who sought to develop a ready supply of food that could “lend itself to easy consumption and efficient metabolism.” Known as the “NMRI Emergency Ration,” these small cans consisted of high fat butterscotch tablets, hard candy fruit drops (containing citric acid to promote the flow of saliva), malted milk tablets, chewing gum, multivitamin tablets and a waterproof pouch.

By 1944, these emergency rations would be adopted as a survival kit for Navy aviators and also serve as the “U.S. Navy Emergency Ration for Life Rafts.”



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